

Mist Encounter

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The last two jumps had been marginal, skating the *Starwayman* right to the edge of known space and even a little bit past it. The theory, at least as far as Booster Terrik's fatigue-fogged mind could remember, was that no commander would be crazy enough to risk a *Victory*-class Star Destroyer chasing a nobody smuggler into uncharted territory.

So far the theory hadn't worked. Maybe third time would be the lucky charm they so desperately needed.

Or maybe third time would bring the *Starwayman* out of hyperspace just in time to smash itself all over a planetary-sized mass. There were reasons why jumping blind into unknown space was considered to be a stupid idea.

Beside Terrik, his Borlovian partner Llollulion gave a five-tiered whistle. "Yeah, okay," Terrik said, getting a grip on the hyperdrive levers and trying not to think about the unknown star system and its unknown planetary-sized masses directly ahead of them. "Let's see if maybe they were smart enough to give up this time."

He pushed the levers forward, and the mottled sky of hyperspace faded into starlines and then into a starry sky. Directly ahead, the system's star was a tiny distant disk blazing with yellow-white light. Bracing himself, Terrik peered into the aft display...

And with a flicker of pseudomotion, the Star Destroyer appeared behind them.

Terrik sighed, too exhausted even to swear. So that was that. He couldn't lose the Star Destroyer, he couldn't outrun it, and he sure as mynocks couldn't outfight it. The options had squeezed down to surrendering, or getting summarily blown to atoms.

He could only hope that the latter option wasn't the only one the commander back there was interested in.

Llollulion gave a sudden three-tiered warble. "You're kidding," Terrik frowned, turning to look. "Where?"

Llollulion pointed out the canopy to the right with his beard feathers. It was a planet, all right: full-sized, close enough to its primary for adequate warmth, its fuzzy edge evidence of a reasonably thick atmosphere.

And it was barely ten minutes full-throttle flight away.

Llollulion warbled again. "You got it, partner," Terrik agreed, throwing power to the sublight engines and turning the *Starwayman* hard to starboard. They couldn't escape, outrun, or outfight their pursuers.

Maybe they could hide from them.

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"Target has changed course, Captain," a voice called up from the crew pit. "They're making a run for that planet."

"Acknowledged," Captain Voss Parck said through clenched teeth as he watched their quarry driving hard for planetfall. Of course the smugglers were making for the planet -- what other options did they have? He'd anticipated this move from the moment the *Strikefast* had come out of hyperspace, and had already given orders to counter it.



Orders which inexplicably had not yet been carried out. "Lieutenant, what's keeping those TIE fighters?" he barked toward the comm officer.

"Hangar Bay Control reports they're having trouble getting them released from their racks, sir," the officer said. "They have two free, but the rest -- "

"They have two free?" Parck cut him off. "What are they waiting for? Launch them!"

"Yes, sir."

Parck stalked down the walkway, swearing viciously under his breath. Between sky-headed techs who insisted on continually redesigning perfectly workable equipment and rule-bound officers who didn't have the brains to modify standard launch-order procedure when necessary, the entire Fleet was sliding straight into the dump tubes.

But that would be changing soon. Barely a week earlier the news had reached the Outer Rim that Chancellor Palpatine had declared himself Emperor of the newly restructured Empire, and had personally committed himself to taking charge of this mess. Some of the ranking officers of the Fleet had already gone on record expressing reservations about the whole situation; for himself, Parck had no doubt that Palpatine and his visionary politics would soon whip things into shape.

A movement off the starboard bow caught his eye: the two TIE fighters, finally heading out in their belated pursuit of the smugglers. He looked back at the quarry ship, did a rapid mental calculation ...

"Tell Hangar Bay Control to get the rest of those TIEs in space," he ordered the comm officer. "The quarry is going to make it down before these two catch up. We're going to have to smoke them out."

But smoke them out he would. That ship was carrying cargo he suspected was for one of the small but noisy resistance groups that had been springing up lately in opposition to Palpatine's New Order. The location of that group would be a fine prize to present to the new Emperor ... and he and the *Strikefast* had not come all the way out here into Unknown Space only to lose that prize.

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They were into the upper atmosphere, and looking for a good place to hide, when Llollulion began picking up the power emanations.

"Uh-oh," Terrik muttered, throwing a quick look at the display as he fought the controls against the atmospheric buffeting. It was a power source, all right, sitting all by itself in the middle of an equatorial forest a quarter of the way to the planetary horizon. "Not good. Double not good."

Llollulion multi-warbled a question. "Because it's just the right size for a small-base power generator, that's why," Terrik told him. "Out here in the middle of nowhere, that means either a smuggler or pirate base. Or maybe even a small Fleet exploratory outpost. Regardless, it's no one who's going to be happy to see us."

Still ... Terrik bit thoughtfully at his lip. Those two fighters behind them were getting closer by the minute; even if he ran the *Starwayman* to ground right now they would be able to lock onto the ship's power plant before he could shut everything down. But if he ran past that other power source first, there was a chance it would baffle the pursuers' sensors just enough to let him slip away without his landing being pinpointed.

It was worth a try, anyway. "Hang on; I'm changing course," he warned Llollulion, throwing the *Starwayman* into a flat sideways slip. "You got the triad on line yet?"

The Borlovian warbled an affirmative. "Okay," Terrik said. "Soon as those fighters get in range, see what you can do about taking them out."

They had reached the forest and were flying at treetop level by the time Llollulion opened up with the *Starwayman*'s laser triad; and it was quickly apparent that the pursuing TIE fighters hadn't spent nearly enough time in atmospheric combat training. A half dozen exchanges of intense laser fire, and Llollulion warbled a seven-tiered whistle of triumph.

"Yeah, great," Terrik growled, feeling a drop of sweat roll down his cheek as he hunched over the controls. One of the TIE fighters was already a blazing mass of rubble in the forest far behind them, and the other was spinning out of control a hundred meters to starboard, rapidly heading downward toward the same oblivion.

But the *Starwayman* had taken some damage, too, and they were almost to the unknown power source dead ahead. The inhabitants there were surely alerted to the approaching ships by now. If they weren't interested in receiving company ...

The second TIE fighter disappeared into the trees with a tremendous crash; and an instant later the *Starwayman* was shooting over a small clearing. Terrik caught a glimpse of a single small house, something that looked like a storage shed on one side and a pair of large metallic boxes on the other --

And then they were past, over forest again and heading for a rising line of crevice-pocked cliffs in the near distance. Llollulion warbled urgently - "Give me a second, will you?" Terrik growled back, throwing the *Starwayman* hard to the left. "I didn't forget we're going to ground. What, you want me to land right next to that place back there?"

Llollulion subsided, grumping audibly to himself. But Terrik didn't care. The trick had worked -- maybe -- and that was all that counted.

The *Starwayman* was in one of the cliffside caves, shielded from sight and powered down, before the next wave of TIE fighters went burning past overhead.

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"This is not," Captain Parck's voice came darkly in Colonel Mosh Barris's ears, "precisely the news I wanted to hear, Colonel. You absolutely sure about this?"

"Yes, sir," Barris said, gazing at the tall rectangular boxes that stood beside the house they'd found in the clearing, a sour taste in his mouth. "The markings on the power generators alone show that much -- our 3PO translator droid has never seen anything like them.

"That doesn't necessarily prove anything," Parck persisted. "These nearer edges of Unknown Space have surely been penetrated by the occasional trader or smuggler. This could easily be the home or retreat of such a human or known alien, who just happened to pick up a couple of souvenirs along his way."

"That's possible, sir," Barris said. "But I think it unlikely. The buildings themselves appear to have been constructed out of local materials, but a fair number of the contents are also of unknown origin. My guess is that we're looking at the survivor of a shipwreck here."

"Who then wandered off somewhere and died," Parck grumbled.

"Or else ran when he heard us coming," Barris said. "We can't tell how long the place has been deserted. Either way, we're stuck with the fact that it's definitely an alien encampment."

There was the faint hiss of a sigh in Barris's ears. A sigh, and the hint of a curse beneath it. "And therefore stuck with the UAE Orders."

"Yes, sir," Barris agreed, silently seconding the captain's curse. The Unknown Alien Encounters section of the standing orders were a relic from the glory days of the Republic, when a new alien species was being discovered every other week and the Senate was falling over itself in its eagerness to throw full membership privileges at every shaggy or lumpy creature a Dreadnaught or Carrack cruiser happened to stumble across. The modern Fleet had no business handling such chores, and even less interest in doing so, and the High Command had repeatedly said so.

Barris had heard rumors that Emperor Palpatine had privately assured the High Command that the burden of the outmoded contact orders would soon be revoked. But for the moment they were still on the lists, and far too many of the Senators supported them. Which meant there was nothing to do but obey them.

"Very well," Parck growled. "Looks like you're going to be spending at least one night down there -- better have your men make



themselves comfortable. I'll have a tech analysis team put together and sent down to take a look. Keep an eye out in case your castaway comes back."

"We will," Barris assured him. "What about the smugglers?"

"The TIE fighters are still looking for them," Parck said. "If they haven't spotted the ship by the time you finish there, we'll switch to a ground search."

"Colonel Barris?" an anxious voice cut in on the circuit. "This is Lieutenant Kavren at the TIE fighter crash site just west of the encampment. Sorry to interrupt, sir, but I really think you'd better come see this."

Barris frowned across the clearing, to where the lights of the search crew could occasionally be seen illuminating the tendrils of evening mist that were beginning to waft through the trees. He wouldn't have pegged Kavren for the excitable type, but there'd been a definite queasiness in the man's voice. "I'll be right there," he said. "With your permission Captain?"

"Go ahead, Colonel," Parck said. "We'll talk later."

The reflection of the lights from the mist was somewhat deceptive, but it was still no more than a three-minute walk from the edge of the clearing to the blackened slash where the TIE fighter had blazed to the ground and its fiery death. A few more seconds in the air, Barris thought sourly, and there wouldn't have been anything left of the alien encampment for them to study. Pity.

Kavren and four troopers were waiting as Barris reached them. The lieutenant's back was unnaturally stiff; the faces of the troopers grim beneath the brims of their black helmets. Lying in the grass at their feet was the limp form of the dead TIE pilot, his flight suit burned and torn. "We found it right here, Colonel," Kavren said, gesturing down at the flight suit. "Several meters away from the main wreckage. Take a look."

Barris lowered himself to one knee beside the body. The helmet had been loosened from the neck of the flight suit, and the long front fastener opened. And the flight suit stuffed with --

"What in blazes?" he demanded, frowning at it.

"It's grass, sir," Kavren confirmed, a slight trembling in his voice. "Grass, leaves, and a lot of those funny-smelling red berries. And that's all."

"The body's gone."

Parck looked around him at the trees and the tendrils of mist floating between them on the light breeze, a sinking feeling in the pit of his stomach. "Have you looked for him?"

"Not yet, sir," Kavren said. "I thought it would be better to alert you first. If there are savages in the area ..."

He didn't finish the sentence, but he didn't really have to. Like most officers of the Fleet, Barris had had his share of run-ins with native savages. "Major Wyan?" he called into his comlink, straightening up. "This is Colonel Barris."

"Yes, Colonel," the major's voice came in his ears.

"I want a troop perimeter set up around the encampment immediately," Barris ordered. Something off to the side at the base of a bush caught his eye, and he stepped over for a closer look. It was the TIE fighter's survival pack, torn open. "We've got native savages out here."

"Understood," Wyan said, his voice suddenly brisk and professional. He'd had experience with native savages, too. "There's a troop carrier almost ready to leave the *Strikefast*; I'll call up and have them put another squad of troopers aboard."

"Better make it a platoon," Barris told him, crouching down beside the survival pack and pulling it open. "Looks like they've made off with the pilot's blaster, spare power packs, and concussion grenades."

"Terrific," Wyan growled. "Primitives with weapons. Just what we need."

"Maybe they'll be considerate enough to blow themselves to pieces before they get to us," Barris said, picking up the pack and standing up again.

"We can always hope, sir," Wyan agreed. "I'll get the security procedures started right away."

"Good. Barris out." Barris stepped back over to the knot of troopers and handed the looted survival pack to Kavren. "I want the flight suit and its contents taken back to the encampment for study, Lieutenant. Then take some troopers and start searching the area. I want the pilot's body found."

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"Sir," Major Wyan said, stepping up to the examination table and stiffening briefly in salute. "The security perimeter is in place."

"Good," Barris said, glancing up through the roof of the transparent weather canopy at the sky. About time, too. Full night was here, and with nightfall inevitably came nocturnal predators. Not to mention unfriendly natives. "Any news from the search team?"

"Still no sign of the pilot's body," Wyan said. "They've found a lot of bits and pieces from the survival pack, though, scattered around like animals had been at it. Maybe our primitives just tore the thing apart without actually keeping any of it."

"Maybe," Barris said. "But until we actually find that blaster, I suggest you continue to assume someone's pointing it at us."

"Yes, sir." Wyan gestured at the table. "So that's what was in the flight suit?"

"Yes," Barris said, looking back at the collection of plant life spread across the examination table and the two techs still sifting through it. An odd aroma permeated the air, probably from the berries that had been crushed for analysis. "So far it seems to be just local grass and leaves and those berries. Some kind of religious ritual, maybe -- "

And without warning, there was the flash and thundercrack of an explosion from behind them.

"Cover!" Barris shouted, spinning around and dropping to one knee as he hauled out his blaster. Halfway to the edge of the clearing a patch of grass was smoldering with the afterburn of the explosion; beyond it, troopers were running toward the closest part of the sentry line, blasters drawn and ready. Someone flicked a searchlight on behind Barris, the brilliant light sweeping across the forest and lighting up the thickening tendrils of mist flowing between the trees. Barris followed the spot of light with his eyes, gripping his blaster tightly as he tried to glimpse the enemy who was attacking them --

And was slammed to the ground as a second explosion came from practically right behind him.

"Colonel!" he heard Wyan shout through the ringing in his ears. "I'm all right," Barris shouted back, twisting around on his stomach. A masterfully direct hit: the collection of grasses and leaves on the examination table was burning brilliantly, the table itself canted noticeably by the blast. On the ground behind it, the two techs were flat on their stomachs, doing their best to squeeze themselves into the grass.

The general comlink channel had come alive with terse orders and reports. Barris kept out of it, staying where he was and bracing himself for the inevitable third explosion.

But the inevitable failed to happen. "All perimeter troopers have checked in," Wyan reported a minute later, crawling closer to Barris's side. "They're doing a complete search of the first twenty meters of forest, but so far there's nothing. Whoever they were, they seem to have gone."



"Considering no one apparently saw anything in the first place, the fact they don't see anything now is not a lot of comfort," Barris retorted, getting cautiously to his feet and brushing himself off with his free hand.

"It's getting pretty misty out there," Wyan said. "Makes for poor visibility."

"Our natives don't seem to be having any trouble with it," Barris said pointedly. "What in blazes were those blasts, anyway? They weren't powerful enough to be concussion grenades."

"I agree, sir," Wyan said. "My guess is they were blaster power packs with the sturm dowels pulled out."

An odd feeling shivered down Barris's back. "That doesn't sound like something savages would be able to figure out," he said.

"I know," Wyan agreed. "You suppose our alien has come back?"

Barris stared out into the darkness of the forest. "Or else our smugglers have."

"Mm," Wyan said thoughtfully. "Trying to scare us away, you think?"

"Or else trying to get us running in circles." Barris keyed his helmet comlink for long-range. "*Strikefast*, this is Colonel Barris." "Captain Parck here," Parck's voice came immediately. "What's happening down there?"

"We were attacked," Barris told him. "Two explosions in the encampment, neither doing significant damage."

"The attackers?"

"No sign of them so far. We're still searching."

"Maybe they lobbed the explosives in from a distance," Parck said. "I'll have a wing of TIE fighters do a flyover. Stand by."

Barris keyed off and stepped back to the examination table. Yes; some sort of powerful catapult, fired from far outside the sentry perimeter. That would explain why no one had spotted anything.

He stopped, looking up at the strips of shredded weather canopy rippling gently in the breeze. No, that didn't work. Anything coming in from above would have had to get through the canopy before it hit the table. It couldn't have done that without him hearing something. Could it?



Something moved at the edge of Barris's eye. He twitched his blaster around, but it was only some small night creature scurrying across the clearing. "Major Wyan?" he called.

"Yes, Colonel?" Wyan said, stepping around the nose of the troop carrier.

"Get some floodlights set up," Barris ordered, pointing to the trees. "I want the whole rim of the forest lit up like the inside of a spark module -- that should help burn off some of this mist, too. Also, fine-mesh the hemisphere sensor screen. I don't want any more explosives getting through without us at least knowing they're coming."

Wyan's reply was lost in the sudden roar as a pair of TIE fighters shot past at treetop level. "What?" Barris asked.

"I was pointing out that there are a lot of avians and avian-sized things flying around," Wyan repeated. "Small ground animals, too - I nearly twisted my ankle stepping on one a minute ago. If we finemesh the screen too far down, we'll have alarms triggering all night."



Barris grimaced; but the major was right. "All right, then, forget the fine-meshing," he growled. "Just get those lights -- "

And suddenly, directly ahead, the nearest trees were silhouetted by a fireball erupting out of the forest in the distance. "What the--?" Wyan barked.

"TIE crash!" Barris snapped, viciously keying his comlink. "Crash team to the troop carrier -- now!"

He had keyed off the comlink, and was just starting to swear, when the distant thunder of the crash rolled across the encampment.

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"You have no idea what brought it down?" Parck's voice asked in Barris's ears.

"Not yet, sir," Barris said, his stomach churning with a simmering anger. "The crash team just got back with the fighter's recording rod. And the pilot's body."

Parck rumbled something under his breath. "At least you got there before the natives had time to steal this one."

"No, sir, they didn't get the body," Barris said. "But they did have time to ransack his survival pack again. The crash team found it torn open and the contents scattered around, just like the last time."

"And no sign of the blaster, power packs, or concussion grenades?"

"No, sir."

For a long moment there was silence on the channel, and Barris found himself gazing across the encampment at the forest. The floodlights he'd ordered had been set up just inside the clearing, bathing the forest in brilliance. Insects and night avians swarmed and buzzed through the area, clearly confused by the artificial daylight, the larger ones throwing quick-moving shadows against the trees.

"You're the man on the scene, Colonel," Parck said at last. "But in my opinion, this has gone way beyond natives making a nuisance of themselves. Are you certain the smugglers aren't involved?"

"I've been wondering that myself, Captain," Barris said. "It could be there's something nearby they don't want us to find and are trying to pin us down here."

"That might explain the attacks themselves," Parck agreed. "What about the flight suit stuffed with grass?"

"Probably a feint," Barris said. "Something to convince us we were only dealing with native primitives."

"Unless we're dealing with both the smugglers and primitives," Parck suggested. "That might -- just a minute," he interrupted himself. "Colonel, did you examine the flight suit itself?"

"I -- " Barris frowned. "Now that you mention it, sir, I don't think so. We were more interested in the -- "

"Go look at it now," Parck cut him off. "Specifically, check whether or not the comlink has been removed from the helmet."

It took a couple of minutes to find where the techs had stored the suit. It took ten seconds more to confirm that the comlink was indeed missing.

"Clever little snakes," Parck murmured when Barris had given him the news. "One might even say inspired. What about the second flight suit, the one you just brought back to the encampment?"

"It's being checked now," Barris told him, looking over to where Major Wyan and one of the troopers were going over it. "Major?"

"The comlink's still here," Wyan confirmed. "They must not have had time to remove it."

"Or decided not to bother," Barris pointed out. "They could already eavesdrop on our communications."

"Not for long they can't," Parck said with grim satisfaction. "I've ordered the circuit that comlink is on to be shut down."

"Yes, sir," Barris said, wincing. Bad enough that the smugglers had gotten away with their theft this long. But to have his commanding officer be the one to pick up on it... "They must still be in the area. I'll get some patrols organized and try to smoke them out."

"There's no rush, Colonel," Parck said. "As a matter of fact, I'd rather you stay put until first light. Your sensors are going to be of limited use in a forest, and there's no sense exposing your men to ambush in the darkness."

"As you wish, Captain," Barris said, feeling his face warming.

"Good," Parck said. "We'll speak further in the morning. Good night, Colonel. Stay alert."

"Yes, sir," Barris said between clenched teeth. "Good night, Captain."

He jabbed the comlink off. "Doesn't sound to me like the Captain has a very high opinion of our troopers," Major Wyan said, coming up beside him.

"Can you blame him?" Barris retorted.

"Under the circumstances, I suppose not," Wyan conceded. "What now?"

"We make our smuggler friends very sorry indeed that they tangled with us, that's what," Barris growled. "First thing I want you to do is double-check the security perimeter again -- I don't want *anything* else getting through tonight."

"Yes, sir. And after that?"

Barris looked out at the brightly lit forest, a fresh surge of anger mixing with the humiliation in his stomach. No smuggler was going to make a fool of him. Or if he did, he wasn't going to live to gloat about it. "After that, you and I are going to sit down with the aerial survey maps, the long-range tracking data from the *Strikefast*, and anything else we can get our hands on. And we're going to figure out how to find those smugglers."

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Almost inaudible over the busy insect twitterings, another distant boom drifted in dully on the cool night breeze. Terrik paused in his work, cocking an ear toward the mouth of the cave and listening hard. It was the fourth such explosion in the past five hours, by his count, not counting that aircraft crash just after sundown. None of the blasts had sounded any closer to them than the first had.

It was the Imperials, of course. But what in space were they playing at?

A shadow moved silently against the starlight streaming through the mouth of the cave. Reflexively, Terrik reached for his blaster; relaxed as he saw it was only Llollulion. "You see anything?" he called softly.

The Borlovian's five-tiered whistle was equally soft, and as negative as each of the previous times. "You know, this doesn't make any sense at all," Terrik complained, walking over to his partner's side and staring down at the misty forest below. "There aren't nearly enough explosions for it to be a concussion spread. But there are too many for it to be nervous troopers throwing grenades at each other's shadows."

For a long minute there was just the sound of the insects. Terrik strained his ears, but there were no more explosions. And then, almost diffidently, Llollulion made a suggestion. "Oh, come *on*," Terrik scoffed. "That was definitely a one-man house - two-man at the very outside. Who in the galaxy would be crazy enough to take on a couple of troop carriers worth of Imperials by himself?"

Still, now that he thought about it, the sound of those blasts did seem to be coming more or less from the direction of the settlement they'd flown over. And the power emanations they'd picked up had implied the place was currently occupied.

So who in the galaxy *would* be crazy enough to take on all those Imperials by himself?

Llollulion warbled again. "Okay, so a pair of Crintlions might take on odds like that to protect their territory," Terrik growled. "Don't try to tell me it would take the Imperials four grenades to deal with two Crintlions."

Another dull explosion drifted in on the breeze. "Five grenades," Terrik amended. "Anyway, it's none of our business."

Llollulion gave a six-tiered whistle.

"I said it's none of our business," Terrik insisted. "You want to dodge a couple squads of Imperial troopers and try to contact whoever's out there, be my guest. Me, I'm going to stay right here."

The Borlovian reared his head back in surprise, his beard feathers stiffening. "Don't look at me like that," Terrik snapped. "I have nothing against picking up allies when it gains us anything. Only this time, it doesn't. We're in Unknown Space, remember? Odds are this is some unknown alien we wouldn't even be able to talk to. And even if we could, who says he'd even want to join forces?"

Terrik spun around and headed back toward the *Starwayman*. "Besides," he said over his shoulder, "all we really want from an ally right now is for him to keep the Imperials busy. And he's already doing that. Let's leave well enough alone, and get this bucket of bolts ready to fly again."

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They had five casualties among the sentry perimeter troopers that night. Three of them had died by the hand of the unseen enemy, their chests or heads blown apart by concussion grenades. No one had seen anything, either before the attacks or afterward. The other two casualties had been accidentally shot by their own nervous comrades, who had mistaken them for intruders in the misty darkness.

And by the time dawn began to lighten the sky, Barris had had enough.

"I suggest you try to calm yourself, Colonel," Parck said, his voice maddeningly calm. "I know it's been a bad night for you --"

"Sir, I've lost five men tonight," Barris cut him off harshly. It wasn't the most politic way to speak to a superior officer; but Barris wasn't feeling especially politic at the moment. "That doesn't even count the three TIE pilots and fighters we lost yesterday evening. I strongly recommend we abandon this site and return to the *Strikefast*. And that we then burn the entire forest down from orbit."

"You're tired, Colonel," Parck said. His voice was still calm, but it suddenly had an edge to it. "You're also not thinking straight. Killing the smugglers won't get us the location of that resistance group we're looking for. You think a burned-out freighter will be an appropriate prize to take back to Emperor Palpatine?"

"I'm not interested in prizes, Captain," Barris said stiffly. "I'm interested in not wasting any more of my men."

"You won't have to," Parck said. "A troop carrier is on its way down with two squads of my stormtroopers. They'll be relieving your troopers."

"They've already arrived," Barris growled, looking across the clearing to where the last of the faceless, white-armored stormtroopers was just disappearing into the forest. Their unasked for presence was a blatant insult to the quality of Barris's own troopers; at the moment, Barris didn't care about that, either. "And if you want my opinion, sir, they're not going to have any better luck finding the smugglers than my troopers did. Smoking them out from orbit is our best option."

"I'll keep your recommendation in mind, Colonel," Parck said, his voice cool. "In the meantime, I suggest you get some rest. The stormtroopers can handle things from here on -- "

And without warning, Parck's voice dissolved in a roar of static. Barris jabbed at the comlink control and the static cut off, leaving his ears ringing painfully. "Full alert!" he shouted, pulling his blaster and running toward the sentry perimeter. "All troopers, full alert. Major Wyan, where are you?"

"Here, sir," Wyan said, coming across the clearing from the perimeter to Barris's right. "All comlink channels are out."

"I know," Barris gritted. "Enough is enough. There are eighteen stormtroopers beating the bushes out there -- send some troopers out to recall them. We're pulling out."

Wyan's mouth fell open slightly. "We're leaving, sir?"

"Yes," Barris bit out. "Any objections?"

The major's lip twitched. Perhaps he'd been listening in on Barris's conversation with Captain Parck. "No, sir, no objections. What about that?" He jerked a thumb at the alien encampment.

An encampment they hadn't much gotten around to studying; and there were high-placed idealists in the Senate who would probably make trouble for them if they left here without a thorough examination.

But there was an answer for that, too. "We'll take it with us," Barris said.

Wyan's mouth dropped another couple of millimeters. "We'll what?"

"I said we'll take it with us," Barris repeated impatiently. "Plenty of room in the transport for all of it. Tell the techs to break out the heavy load lifters and get busy -- I want everything aboard in half an hour. Move it!"

Wyan swallowed visibly. "Yes, sir," he said, and headed toward the alien house at a brisk trot.

Cautiously, Barris tried the comlink. But it was still being blanketed by the jamming static, and with a curse he shut it off again.

With a curse, and a painfully tight sensation in his stomach. There was only one reason to jam their communications: after the sniping of the previous night, the unseen enemy out there was preparing to launch a major attack. Stepping over into the partial cover of one of the troop carriers, making sure he was within shouting range of the entire Imperial encampment, he got a good grip on his blaster and prepared for battle.

But once again, the enemy refused to play to his expectations. Within ten minutes the first of the stormtroopers began to reemerge from the forest in response to the orders from Barris's messengers. The comlink jamming continued as the rest of the Imperials returned to the encampment, but the attack Barris had anticipated never materialized. And within his stipulated half hour, the alien encampment was packed aboard the transport and they were ready to leave.

Except for a single, tiny hitch. One of the eighteen stormtroopers was missing.

"What do you mean, missing?" Barris demanded as three of the stormtroopers headed purposefully into the forest again, four of their comrades taking up backstop positions just inside the clearing behind them. "I thought these were the new elite of Palpatine's new military. How could one of them be missing?"

"I don't know, sir," Wyan said, looking around. "But I've come to the conclusion you were right. The sooner we get out of here, the better."

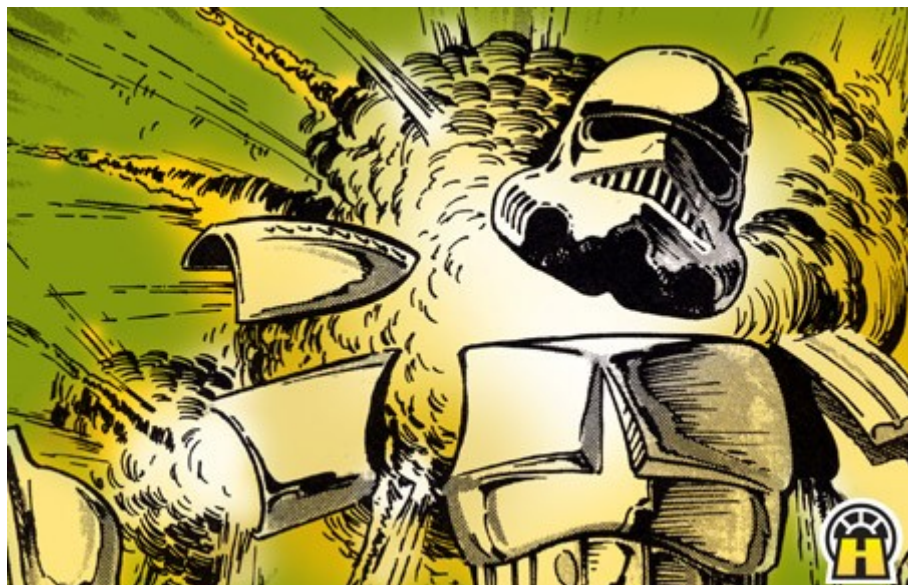
Abruptly, Barris came to a decision. To blazes with the stormtroopers -- if they wanted to go looking for more trouble, that was their business. "Have all techs board the transport," he ordered Wyan. "The troopers will follow, in standard retreat/guard order. We'll leave as soon as everyone's aboard."

"What about the stormtroopers?" Wyan asked.

"They've got the troop carrier they came down in," Barris said. "They can stay behind and beat the bushes to their hearts' content." He turned toward the transport the techs had just finished loading, caught sight of one of the stormtroopers standing rigid guard just outside the hatchway. "You -- stormtrooper -- go tell your commander -- "

He never finished the sentence. Without twitch or warning, the stormtrooper abruptly dissolved in a brilliant explosion.

Barris was flat on the ground in an instant, his ears aching from the sound of the blast. "Alert!" he shouted automatically, searching the nearest forest edge for any sign of the attacker. But as always, there was nothing. A handful of troopers -- brave or suicidal, Barris wasn't sure which -- were charging that direction anyway. For all the good that would do.



Beside him, Wyan gave a sudden, awe-struck curse. "Colonel - look at that."

Barris swiveled on his stomach to face the transport again. The smoke of the explosion was clearing away, revealing that the ship itself had sustained only minor damage. Mostly cosmetic, in fact, and nothing that should interfere with flight operation or hull integrity. He lowered his eyes to the crumpled form of the stormtrooper --

And sucked in his breath in shock. The armor, no longer white, was scattered about in bits and pieces in a small radius around the spot where the stormtrooper had been standing.

The armor was all there was. The body itself had been completely disintegrated.

"I don't believe it," Wyan murmured under his breath. "That blast wasn't that powerful. How could it have destroyed the body so completely?"

"I don't know," Barris said, getting back to his feet. "And for the moment, I don't care. We're getting out of here. Now."

He eased his comlink on, discovered the jamming had finally ceased. "This is Colonel Barris," he said. "All Imperial troops are to return to the encampment at once and prepare for evacuation."

"Sir?" Wyan murmured, staring out at the forest. "Looks like they found him."

Barris followed his gaze. Emerging into the clearing were the three stormtroopers who'd gone to look for their missing comrade ... and they had indeed found him. Or at least, what was left of him.

"The perfect end to a perfect mission," Barris growled. "Come on, Major. Let's get out of here."

* * *

Barris had half expected the transport and troop carriers would be attacked as they lifted from the forest and headed for the sky. But no missiles or laser pulses followed them up, and soon they were once again inside the shelter of the *Strikefast's* hangar bay.

Captain Parck was waiting beside the transport as Barris emerged. "Colonel," he nodded gravely in greeting. "I don't recall giving you permission to leave your position."

"No, sir, you didn't," Barris said, hearing the weariness in his own voice. "But as you yourself pointed out earlier, I was the commander on the scene. I did what I deemed best."

"Yes," Parck murmured. For a moment he continued to look at Barris, then shifted his gaze to the transport itself. It seemed to Barris that his eyes lingered for a moment on the minor blast damage caused by the impossible explosion that had disintegrated that stormtrooper ...

"Well, what's done is done. I'm told you brought the alien encampment up with you."

"Yes, sir," Barris said, frowning slightly as he tried to read his commander's expression. He would have expected Parck to be angry, or at least pointedly dissatisfied with the troopers' performance. But instead, he seemed merely thoughtful. "Do you want me to have the techs get back to work on it?"

"There's no hurry," Parck said. "For now, everyone is to report to debriefing. Those smuggler attacks were far too effective; I want to know everything about what happened down there." He brought his gaze hard onto Barris: "As for you, Colonel, I want you to accompany me back to my office."

So he was going to drop the hammer on Barris in private. A small favor, at least.

"Yes, sir," Barris sighed.

They left the hangar bay; but to Barris's surprise they didn't go to Parck's office. Instead, the captain led the way up to the hangar bay control tower, the lights of which had been inexplicably darkened. "Sir?" Barris asked as Parck stepped to the observation window.

"An experiment, Colonel," Parck said, gesturing to the man at the control board. "All right, dim the lights in the hangar bay."

Barris stepped to Parck's side as the lights outside the observation window faded to nighttime levels. The transport and troop carriers they'd just left were prominently visible directly below; beyond them at the other

end of the bay were three *Kappa*-class shuttles and a Harbinger courier ship. No one was in sight anywhere. "What sort of experiment?" Barris asked.

"The testing of a theory, actually," Parck said. "Make yourself comfortable, Colonel. We may be here a while."

They'd been there nearly two hours when a shadowy figure emerged stealthily from the transport. Silently, it slipped across the darkened hangar bay toward the other ships, taking advantage of the sparse cover along the way.

"Who is that?" Barris asked, straining his eyes to try to penetrate the dim light.

"The source of all your troubles down on the surface, Colonel," Parck said with obvious satisfaction. "Unless I'm mistaken, that's the alien whose home you invaded."

Barris frowned. One alien? *One* alien? "That's impossible, sir," he protested. "Those attacks could not have been the work of a single alien."

"Well, we'll see if one or two others join him," Parck said. "If not, I would say he was it."

The shadowy figure had moved across the floor to the other ships now. For a moment it paused as if considering. Then, deliberately, it stepped to the door of the middle Kappa shuttle and slipped inside. "It appears he was indeed alone," Parck said, pulling out a comlink and thumbing it on. "All right, commander, move in. He's in the middle Kappa. Set all weapons for stun: I want him alive and unharmed."

* * *

After all the trouble the alien had created for Colonel Barris on the planet surface, Parck had expected him to put up a terrific fight against his captors. To his mild surprise, the other apparently surrendered to the stormtrooper squad without any resistance at all. Perhaps he was taken by surprise. More likely, he knew when resistance was futile.

Which to Parck's mind merely made the creature that much more intriguing. And made the nebulous plan forming in the back of his mind that much more feasible.

The hangar bay lights had been restored to their normal intensity by the time the stormtroopers escorted the alien out of the shuttle, and Parck found himself staring in fascination as the prisoner was brought over to where he and Barris waited. He was generally very human in size and build, though with some notable differences. He was dressed in what appeared to be skins and furs, apparently hand-made from the indigenous animals from the forest where he'd been living. In the center of a square of armed stormtroopers, he nevertheless had an air of almost regal confidence about him as he walked.

"Look at that," Barris muttered, a note of disgust in his voice as he gestured toward the alien. "Reminds me of those dirty Jawa things on Tatooine. You know, with those -- "

"Quiet, Colonel," Parck murmured as the alien and his escort came to a stop in front of him. "Welcome aboard the Victory Star Destroyer *Strikefast*. Do you speak Basic?"

For a moment the alien seemed to be studying him. "Some," he said.

"Good," Parck said. "I'm Captain Parck, commander of this ship. What's your name?"

Leisurely, the alien let his gaze drift around the hangar bay. Not like a primitive overwhelmed by the size and magnificence of the place, but like another military man sizing up his enemy's strengths. And weaknesses. "I am called Mitth'raw'nuruodo," he said, bringing his eyes back to Parck.

"Mitth'raw'nuruodo," Parck repeated, trying not to mangle the alien word and not succeeding all that well. "First of all, I want you to know that we did not intend to intrude on your privacy down there. We were chasing smugglers, and happened upon your home. One of our standing orders is to study all unknown species we come across."

"Yes," Mitth'raw'nuruodo said. "So said also the K'rell'n traders who first contacted my people."

Parck frowned. K'rell'n traders? "Must mean Corellians," Barris suggested.

"Ah," Parck nodded. "Of course. I imagine dealing with them is how you learned Basic."

"What do you wish of me?" Mitth'raw'nuruodo asked.

"What do you wish of us?" Parck countered. "You went to a great deal of effort to inveigle your way aboard this ship. What did you hope to accomplish?"

"If you plan to kill me, I would ask that it be done quickly," Mitth'raw'nuruodo said, ignoring the question.

"We don't have to just ask you these questions," Barris put in harshly. "We have drugs and interrogation methods -- "

"Enough," Parck said, cutting off Barris's tirade with an upraised hand. "You'll have to excuse Colonel Barris, Mitth'raw'nuruodo. You ran him and his troopers around in concentric rings down there, and he's not at all happy about that."

The alien looked at Barris. "It was necessary."

"Why?" Parck persisted. "What did you hope to accomplish here?"

"To return home."

"You were shipwrecked?"

"I was exiled."

The word seemed to hang in the fume-scented air of the hangar bay. "Why?" Parck asked into the silence.

"The leaders and I disagreed," Mitth'raw'nuruodo said.

Parck snorted under his breath, thinking about some of the louder members of the Imperial Senate. "Yes, we have the same problems with some of our leaders," he told Mitth'raw'nuruodo. "Perhaps we can help each other."

The alien's eyes narrowed slightly. "How?"

"As you see, we have many starships," Parck said, waving a hand around the hangar bay. "There's no reason why we couldn't provide you with what you need to get home."

"In exchange for what?"

"I'll tell you in a moment," Parck said. "First, though, I'd like to know exactly how you were able to outmaneuver all those troopers down there."

"It was not difficult," Mitth'raw'nuruodo said, looking at Barris again. "Your spacecraft crashed near my place of exile, and I had time to examine it before your following troops arrived. The pilot was dead. I took his body and hid it away."

"And filled his flight suit with grass," Barris put in. "Hoping we wouldn't notice you'd taken his comlink."

"And you didn't," the alien reminded him calmly. "More important to me was that you would find the situation intriguing or disturbing, and that you would thus bring the suit and fermented pyussh berries back to your camp."

"Fermented berries?" Barris echoed.

"Yes," the alien said. "When fermented and crushed, pyussh berries are a strong lure for certain small nocturnal animals."

"Which you'd strapped the gimmicked blaster power packs to," Barris said suddenly. "That's how you got them in past our sentry perimeter."

"Yes," the alien said with a short nod of his head. "Also how I attacked the soldiers later. I used a sling to throw more of the berries onto their armor, which then drew the animals to them."

"You also caused a TIE fighter to crash," Parck said. "At least, I presume that was your doing. How did you accomplish that?" Mitth'raw'nuruodo shrugged fractionally. "I knew the spacecraft would come to search. In preparation I had strung some of my monofilament line between two of the taller tree tops. One of the spacecraft hit it."

Parck nodded. And at such low altitude, of course, the pilot wouldn't have had enough time to recover from the sudden impact. "It wouldn't have done you any good to capture the TIE fighter intact, you know," he told the alien. "They're not equipped with hyperdrives."

"I did not expect the spacecraft to survive," Mitth'raw'nuruodo said. "I wanted the pilot's equipment. And his comlink."

"But you didn't take the comlink," Barris objected. "We checked at the encampment and it was still there."

"No," Mitth'raw'nuruodo said. "What was there was the comlink from the first pilot."

Parck smiled in spite of himself. So simple, yet so ingenious. "So you switched the comlinks. That way, when we finally discovered the first one was gone and locked it out of the circuit, you still had one that functioned. Very ingenious."

"Very simple," Mitth'raw'nuruodo countered.

"So you killed a TIE pilot for his comlink," Barris said harshly. Clearly, he wasn't nearly as impressed by the alien's resourceful ness as Parck was. "Why did you keep killing my men? For the fun of it?"

"No," Mitth'raw'nuruodo said gravely. "So that soldiers with fuller armor would come."

"With fuller -- ?" Barris broke off. "The stormtroopers? You wanted stormtroopers to come?"

"Your soldiers wore helmets," the alien said, tracing an imaginary brim around his forehead. "No good for me." He touched a hand to his face. "I needed armor that would cover my face."

"Of course," Parck nodded. "That was the only way you would be able to enter the encampment undetected."

"Yes," Mitth'raw'nuruodo agreed. "I used an explosive on one first, so that I would have a set of armor to study -- "

"Just a minute," Barris interrupted. "How did you do that without anyone hearing the explosion?"

"It came at the same moment I began the communications jamming," the alien said. "Of course no one heard."

"Which you accomplished using the comlink you'd borrowed?" Parck suggested.

"Yes," Mitth'raw'nuruodo said. "I studied the armor and found a way to kill the soldier inside without noticeable damage. I did so, then walked into the camp and went into the large ship. No one was yet inside. With small branches I had brought I stood the armor upright and put it outside the doorway, with an explosive inside to destroy it."

"So that we wouldn't realize there were actually two missing stormtroopers," Parck nodded again. "Again, ingenious. Finally, then, where did you hide during the ride up?"

"Inside the second power generator casing," Mitth'raw'nuruodo told him. "It is nearly empty - I have been using it for parts to keep the first running."

Parck cocked an eyebrow at him. "Which implies you've been here for a while. I can see why you wanted so desperately to leave."

Mitth'raw'nuruodo drew himself up to his full height. "I was not desperate. It is necessary that I return to my people."

"Why?" Parck asked.

Again, the alien seemed to study him. "Because they are in danger," he said at last. "There are many dangers in the galaxy."

"Including us?" Barris growled.

The alien didn't flinch. "Yes."

"And how would you help protect your people from these dangers?" Parck said, throwing an annoyed look at Barris.

"They do not accept the concept of -- I do not know the word. An attack made against an enemy before he attacks you."

"A preemptive strike," Parck supplied.

"A preemptive strike," Mitth'raw'nuruodo repeated. "I alone of our warrior leaders accept this concept as being within the correct bounds of warfare."

So he'd been a warrior leader, then. Obvious, now, really. "And you think you can now persuade your people to accept this concept?"

"I do not intend to try," Mitth'raw'nuruodo said calmly. "I do not need their permission to fight on their behalf."

"What, all by yourself?" Barris said, his voice half incredulity and half sneer.

Mitth'raw'nuruodo eyed him, and Parck thought he could detect a note of contempt in the alien's face. "If necessary."

"That's very gallant," Parck said. "Also very foolish. And potentially very wasteful."

"You have an alternative to suggest?" the alien countered. Parck smiled slightly.

"You're still studying us, aren't you?" he asked. "Even now, as our prisoner, with little hope of escape, you're studying us."

"Of course," the alien said. "You said it yourselves: you are potential dangers."

"True," Parck said. "On the other hand, how better to neutralize a potential danger than from within it?"

Out of the corner of his eye he saw Barris's mouth drop open. "Captain, what are you suggesting?"

"I'm offering Mitth'raw'nuruodo the chance at a position within the Fleet, Colonel," Parck said, watching the alien's face closely. There was no surprise there, no change of expression at all. Perhaps he was too shocked to react.

More likely he'd already anticipated the offer. Perhaps had even deliberately maneuvered the conversation this direction. "Emperor Palpatine has many enemies," Parck continued. "The resistance groups sprouting up show that much. A warrior leader of Mitth'raw'nuruodo's skills would be a valuable asset to us."

"But he's an -- " Barris broke off his sentence with a hiss.

"An alien?" Parck finished for him. "Yes, he is. But sometimes that doesn't make a difference."

"It does with Palpatine," Barris said harshly.

"Not always." Parck lifted his eyebrows slightly. "I'm willing to risk it, Mitth'raw'nuruodo. How about you?"

"The benefit to you is clear," Mitth'raw'nuruodo said. "What would be the benefit to me?"

"Access to the Fleet's files on aliens here at the Outer Rim, for one thing," Parck said. "A chance to use your skills to seek out and neutralize threats to your people that might exist within the boundaries of the Empire." He shrugged. "And who knows? Perhaps the Emperor would be willing to send you back here with a force strong enough to neutralize those other threats to your people that you mentioned. After all, a threat to your people would also be a potential threat to the Empire."

Mitth'raw'nuruodo's eyes flicked to Barris. "And if I am not acceptable to your people?"

"Then I give you my personal promise that I'll take you wherever you wish to go," Parck said.

"Sir, I strongly suggest you reconsider this," Barris said, his voice soft but urgent. "The Emperor will never accept this -- this creature."

Parck smiled to himself. No, the Emperor did not in general think very highly of non-humans ... but there were some notable if top secret exceptions. Such as the aliens Darth Vader had discovered on a ruined world and recruited into private service to Palpatine. The commander of Vader's ship on that mission - a cousin of Parck's and a former rival at the Academy - had been promoted to Vice Admiral for his part in that encounter.

Maybe Parck had finally found a way to match him. Or even to pass him up. "Have we an agreement?"

"The risk is worth taking," Mitth'raw'nuruodo said. "I will come speak with your Emperor."

Parck smiled, a warm sense of satisfaction flowing through him. He had his prize now, all right. A far better prize than the petty and totally insignificant smuggler still hiding on the planet below. "Excellent," he said. "We'll leave at once. One warning, though: you're almost certainly going to have to change your name. 'Mitth'raw'nuruodo' is far too hard for the average Fleet officer to pronounce."

"Of course," the alien said, smiling. He looked at Barris, those glowing red eyes -- as Barris had pointed out, so reminiscent of a Jawa's -- glittering in deep contrast to the darkness of his blue skin and blue-black hair. "Perhaps my core name would be easier for the average Fleet officer. Call me Thrawn."

"Thrawn it is, then," Parck nodded. "And now, perhaps you'll accompany me to the bridge. Your Imperial orientation might as well begin now."

* * *

From the mouth of the cave, Lollulion warbled urgently. "What are you talking about?" Terrik demanded, coming up beside him. "They're not going to give up now."

The Borlovian warbled again, handing over the macrobinoculars. Muttering under his breath, Terrik jammed them against his eyes and peered upward.

Just in time to see the Star Destroyer flicker with pseudomotion as it made the jump to lightspeed.

"Well, I'll be," he mumbled, lowering the macrobinoculars in disbelief. A sudden thought struck him, and he lifted them again, searching the sky from horizon to horizon. But there were no other ships in sight that might have come here to take over the search. Unless they were lying in ambush on the other side of the planet...

Terrik grinned. If they were skulking in wait around the horizon hoping to draw him out, they were in for a rude surprise. The *Starwayman* might be old and battered, but given a halfway decent head start she could outpace most anything out there. "Go fire up the converters," he ordered Lollulion. "We're getting out of here."

The Borlovian warbled acknowledgment and headed into the cave. Terrik gave the sky one last check; and then, almost unwillingly, found himself gazing across the forest toward where the encampment had been. Could something about that place have been the reason the Star Destroyer had left so suddenly? Terrik couldn't imagine how or why that might happen, but the connection seemed inescapable.

Still, it hardly mattered. Terrik had a cargo to deliver, and for whatever reason he now had a clear shot to do so. And whatever might have happened out there --

Looping the macrobinoculars around his neck, he turned and headed back into the cave. Whatever had happened out there, it certainly had nothing to do with him.

